

Evensong - 2/7/17

I believe that everything we have in our scripture is there for a reason. We all believe that the gospels and letters which make up our New Testament were originally penned by men of faith and prayer, inspired by faith and God's grace. I think the same is true of the men who, a couple of centuries later, chose which documents would finally make 'the cut' which we now know as our Canons, and which would not. They too were men of faith and prayer, inspired by faith and God's grace. So given this what do we make of the story of Thomas. Thomas has been labelled as a 'doubter' by two millennia of history books, sermons, cartoons and theological discourses in the Christian tradition. We all know about 'Doubting Thomas' - do any of us ever talk about 'Denying Peter.'? - not really

I think Thomas gets a bad rap and is not to blame for this label, and I think his story is included in our scriptures for a reason - God's reason. Thomas made a reasonable statement in an unreasonable, once-in-a-lifetime resurrection situation. What's fascinating is how comfortable we are in letting Thomas be so written off. Maybe we need his doubt to make sense of our own. But when we let the story end with a label as easy as, "Doubting Thomas," we let ourselves live in disbelief as well. The story of Doubting Thomas, speaks to rebellion, to passion and change, and eventually to the personal revelation of Christ to a very human man.

One word marks the rebellious nature of Thomas. It's the word "Unless." Thomas says, "Unless I see... I will not believe." If you read the Gospel of John this probably comes as something of a surprise because throughout John, Thomas is shown as hearing Christ's calling very clearly. In fact, as Jesus headed to the tomb of Lazarus, He spoke somewhat cryptically of death, of understanding what was to come, and it was Thomas who called the other disciples follow Jesus to the end when he said to, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' (John 11:16). Later in the Gospel, Thomas asks Jesus, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the

way?" (John 14:6). Jesus responds, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

But somehow, the very human Thomas loses sight of this when he is busy somewhere else when the other disciples meet with the resurrected Jesus in the closed room. When they tell him of their experience he is, I think understandably, fairly sceptical of their account. He wants to see the nail marks himself and put his finger into Christ's side. Now I reckon I would find it a little hard to believe myself. I think Thomas would have wanted to believe, but really, he had seen Jesus crucified, how could he possibly be alive and well? Don't we all find ourselves in this position from time to time? We want to believe, but really, with all the bad stuff happening around us it's really hard. I think this is what Thomas was living with at the time after Christ's death. He would have been grieving profoundly for his leader and friend. When we find ourselves in similar positions we too can become very cynical of everything. Just like Thomas we often fight tooth and nail to get some measure of control and sanity back into our lives - in fact sometimes, when the going gets tough, we try to rely on ourselves and doubt everything and everyone around us, including our faith.

Poor Thomas! One word marks the very human nature of Thomas. "Unless," Thomas says, "Unless I see... I will not believe." This one remark has branded him as "Doubting Thomas" ever since. But if he doubted, he also believed. When Jesus invited him to touch the holes in his hands and side, Thomas makes what is certainly the most explicit statement of faith in the New Testament: "My Lord and My God!" and in doing so gave Christians a prayer that will be said till the end of time. He also prompted Jesus to a statement which has provided encouragement all later Christians: "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29).

Yet Thomas' testimony doesn't end in this profound statement of belief. In John's Gospel, belief is never static. A person is always in the process of 'believing,' that is, learning belief in a broken world. From time to time I wonder how we have

managed, over the centuries, to become a church which is often seen as a museum for the good, and not as I believe Jesus preached, a hospital for the broken. Our faith will never be about certainty. The reality of belief is that it is a complexity of living another way, God's way, a way of love and peace, in a broken world. Christian history tells us that Thomas went on, admittedly somewhat reluctantly to share the gospel in Syria, Persia, and India, far from the certainty of his home.

God performed many miracles through Thomas. He helped people believe in the message of Jesus. In India he created many churches that also served as hospitals for the broken. Many of these churches still stand as testament to the courage and belief of Thomas. Through belief Thomas was quite courageous. Right before his death in 72AD, Thomas stood up to an Indian king (whose wife had become a Christian) when he pressured Thomas to make religious sacrifices to an idol. Miraculously, the idol shattered into pieces when Thomas was forced to approach it. The king was so enraged that he ordered his high priest to kill Thomas, and he did: Thomas died from being pierced by a spear.

So what is God trying to say to us through the story of Thomas? Why was his story included in our Scriptures? Thomas shared his fate and calling with Peter the impetuous, with James and John, the "sons of thunder," with Philip and his foolish request to see the Father—undeniably with all the apostles in their weakness and lack of understanding. It is important however not to dwell on these very human weaknesses of the men of faith in the first century, for Christ did not pick worthless men. Their very human weaknesses serve to point to the fact that holiness is a gift of God and not a human conception; it is given to ordinary men and women with very human weaknesses; it is God who gradually transforms those weaknesses into the image of Christ, the courageous, trusting, and loving one.

The story of Thomas invites all doubters and seekers alike, to celebrate and worship God, to serve their neighbour, and grow together. Thomas' encounter with Jesus shows how his response to doubt, that of curiosity and searching, can ultimately lead to deep belief. Thomas was greater than his doubt because he saw and believed and served beyond a doubt. Blessed are you who have not seen and have believed beyond a doubt.

<https://www.onscripture.com/thomas-doubt>